



AN ACTIVIST FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

IQBAL MASIH – PAKISTAN

You are now paying your final visit to a boy from the near past. It is early 1995, and you are in a town somewhere in Pakistan, a nation carved out of British-ruled India only fifty years ago. You are standing at the back of an old, run-down meeting hall, waiting to hear a speech given by the boy you are here to meet. His name is **Iqbal Masih**. As you look around at the crowd; you notice that most of the audiences are young like you. But in all other ways, these children who stand there, quietly murmuring to each other, are not like you. Some have faces pinched with hunger, some bear scars on their bodies.

Some are even bent over as if they are already very old. All of them are thin, poorly dressed, and their faces have lost the carefree innocence of youth. They look as though they have seen too much suffering, too young. They also look afraid.

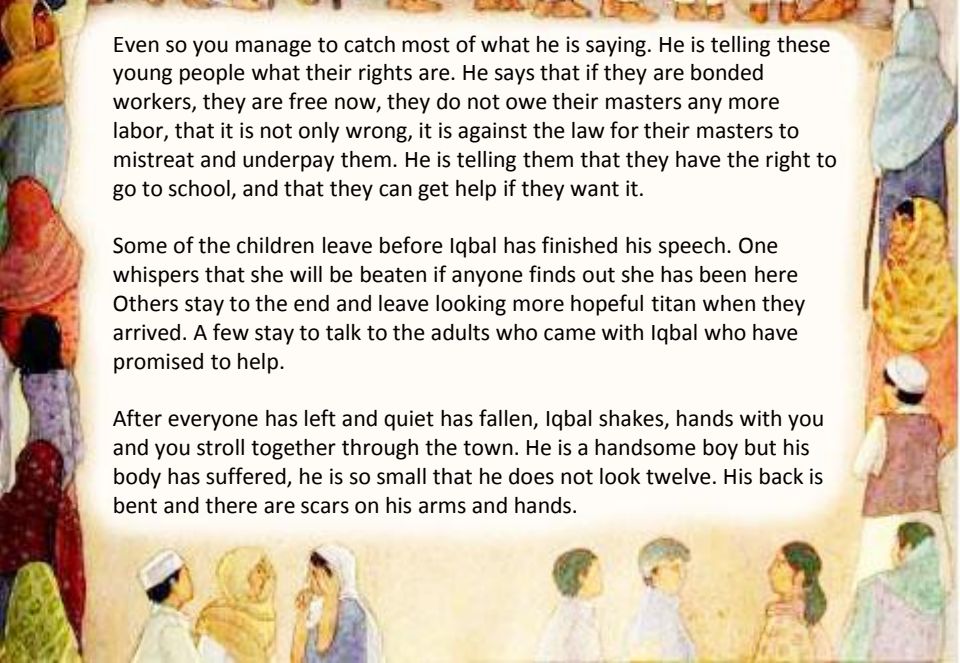
Iqbal Masih enters with a few adults and is introduced by a man who praises his courage and intelligence. He reminds the audience that if anyone needs help, to please let him know, and he will do what he can. You cannot see Iqbal and have difficulty listening to his speech. It is hot in the room, people are shuffling about and there is no microphone.



Even so you manage to catch most of what he is saying. He is telling these young people what their rights are. He says that if they are bonded workers, they are free now, they do not owe their masters any more labor, that it is not only wrong, it is against the law for their masters to mistreat and underpay them. He is telling them that they have the right to go to school, and that they can get help if they want it.

Some of the children leave before Iqbal has finished his speech. One whispers that she will be beaten if anyone finds out she has been here. Others stay to the end and leave looking more hopeful than when they arrived. A few stay to talk to the adults who came with Iqbal who have promised to help.

After everyone has left and quiet has fallen, Iqbal shakes hands with you and you stroll together through the town. He is a handsome boy but his body has suffered, he is so small that he does not look twelve. His back is bent and there are scars on his arms and hands.





Once outside you walk slowly in the heat along a narrow lane with small, square houses on either side. Men ride by on bicycles and a truck goes past, covered with elaborate, colorful decorations . Iqbal begins his story.

My story is just like the stories of the children you saw in the meeting hall. Only the details will differ. I come from a small country village in the Punjab called Muridke. My eldest brother was getting married and my parents had no money to pay for the wedding, so they accepted a loan from a man who said that they could pay it back by sending me to work in his carpet factory.

I was four years old when I went to work for him. I hardly ever saw my family after that I was small and scared, and soon found out I had reason to be. The factory owner knew that people like my parents have little or no education, so they cannot read a contract or bond or even know there could be such a thing. So he had managed to trick my parents quite easily. The interest he was charging on the loan was more than he was "paying" for my work .As a result my parents' debt was increasing all the time.

The people who ran the factory were very cruel to me. At times they even chained me to a loom so I had to squat all day long to work. That is why my back is bent over, from not being allowed to stand up. And look at my hands from tying many thousands of knots, they are all knotted, too. You will notice that I wheeze a lot from breathing in carpet dust day in day out for so many years.

There were other children besides me working in the factory as well. We had to work twelve to fourteen hours a day, even seven days a week with no time for going outdoors and playing, and we were beaten if our owner thought we were misbehaving. And of course we had no schooling whatsoever.



They fed us very little and the food was poor quality without much nourishment in it. They even took the cost of the food out of our little pay, and we never got any money for ourselves because it was all going to pay the debts of our parents.

When I was ten, I was rescued from this life of pain and misery by a man called Ehsan Ulla Khan. In 1988, he founded the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF) to free children like me from bonded labor. I had gone to a meeting like the one you just saw, where I discovered that bonded child labor is illegal now. I was so moved on finding out about my rights that before I knew it, I was standing up and making a speech at the meeting – a speech that was then printed in a newspaper! After that, I refused to go back to my “owner” and Ehsan Ulla Khan helped me get into one of the schools he had founded for children like me. I joined the BLLF and, by giving talks like the one tonight, I have helped other children escape from bonded labor.

I became one of the organization’s best speakers, and my speeches continued to be printed in the newspapers. I soon became famous, and I was sent to the United States and Europe to carry our message there. Just a little while ago, in December 1994, I received the Reebok Prize for Youth in Action.



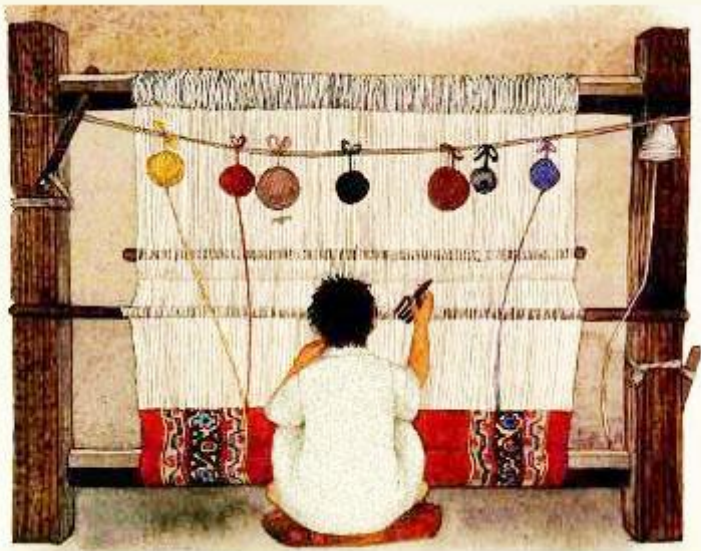
This is an international Award! I am happy to be helping other children to gain their freedom and their rights. I think I have saved about 3000 children so far.

Now that I am at school, I like studying and learning. One thing I am learning is more about child labor in my own country, and in others. In Pakistan, although bonded child labor is now illegal, no one makes any arrests and children are still working as near-slaves in many industries.



The biggest employer of children is the carpet weaving industry. Over a million children and maybe more are doing this kind of work for pennies a day. Then the carpets are sold in Europe and North America to rich customers who know no better. Not only does this go on in our country, but in India and Bangladesh as well.

And all over the world, children are doing other kinds of hard work for very long hours every day of the week. There are over 73 million children under the age of fourteen doing many different kinds of work. Most, but not all of them, live in Asia, Africa and South America. They are treated very badly, and then the things they make are sold in rich western countries. These children are to be found in factories stuffing toys for big western toy companies, or sewing sequins on fancy gown, or sharpening surgical instruments. Some of them work in dangerous places like glass or brick factories with no protection from sharp glass or hot furnaces, or they are put at risk making matches or fireworks. Some suffer horrible burns and yet receive no medical help. Many children also work from very young ages as servants for rich people, or they do farm work like cutting sugarcane or many-many hours each day.



I have learnt that the child labor is growing all over the works in so-called developing countries. It is true that poor families in poor countries need every member to help making a living. I think it is an honorable thing to work hard and take pride in work well done. And no matter whether they are rich or poor, all children who help their families can feel good about what they contribute.

But there is something very wrong when children are forced to work as hard or harder than grown-ups and it is wrong for factory owners to steal us from our families with lies. Sometimes these factory people even kidnap children to work for them. When they begin to work, the youngest ones often receive no pay at all. I do not think that this helps poor families, because it dooms their children to yet more poverty and ignorance.


Children are dying young from diseases caused by work they are forced to do, or they are growing up crippled or shrunken like I am. They have no chance to go to school to be educated. If they were, they couldn't be cheated like my parents were. It cannot be right to beat us and brand us, or to make us work while refusing to hire fully grown people. The main reason they want children, you see, is because we are small and helpless.

You can see that I get very angry when I think of these things. But I know that my speaking out is making a difference. The carpet industry here is already losing millions of dollars because rich people in the West do not want to buy goods made by enslaved children. I am hoping that becoming famous will allow me to reach even more people around the world. To me, children are the future wealth of any country, if they are free to grow up and to be educated to do more than unskilled work.

I feel good about my own future. When I grow up, I want to become a lawyer, so that I can help to fight injustices against children. Right now my life is good, too. Now that I am free, I can see my mother and father again, and play with my cousins. I have a more normal life once more – if you don't count the death threats! The “carpet mafia” we call them. They are angry factory owners who want to keep things the way they are and don't care at all about our welfare. I don't worry about these threats too much though.

I see that I must go now. There are the other BLFF people waiting for me. I am glad to have met you. Go home and tell your families about what I have told you, Okay? You can help too, you know. Goodbye!





Iqbal went home to visit his village of Muridke in the spring of 1995. On April 16 he was riding a bicycle with two of his cousins when he was shot dead under mysterious circumstances. He was only twelve years old.

His murder was never solved, but gave suspicion still rests on the "Carpet Mafia" Iqbal Masih has been so successful in exposing the evils of child labor that Pakistan lost about 14 million U. S. dollars in sales in one year alone. If factory owners were behind the murder, it backfired because sales dropped another 10 million dollars after the world heard the terrible news.

One person who learned about the murder of Iqbal Masih was another twelve-year-old boy — front Toronto, Ontario, in Canada. **Craig Keilburger** had never heard of Iqbal Masih before, but he was so upset when he read about the murder that he founded almost single-handedly a children's volunteer organization to fight enforced child labor. It is called "**Free the Children.**"

Craig's efforts to publicize the evils of child labor have been so successful that he has been able to travel around the world, speaking to heads of state and government agencies, and helping to raise money for organizations like BLLF that free children and give them homes and education. One of the many ways he has helped to "free the children" has been to urge people to buy only carpets with a "Rugmark" label. This guarantees that they are not made using child labor. Craig has also founded branches of Free the Children in many countries.

There are many other organizations around the globe that work to end enforced child labor. Just a few of the other organizations are: UNICEF, through the United Nations; Child Rights Information Network in London, England; International Programme for the elimination of Child Labor in Geneva, Switzerland; Set the Children Free in New Zealand; Community Aid Abroad in Australia; and U.S. Child Labor Coalition in the U.S.A. If you want to help out, too, you can contact one of them, or another organization of your choice. One of the easiest ways to find these and similar organizations is to look on the Internet or to ask for help at your local library

Iqbal Masih became a martyr for what he believed in, but he achieved something important both in life and in death. In life, he showed other children that just because they are small does not mean they are helpless.

He gave comfort and hope to other children like him and helped them to become free. Even his death could not stop the impact he made. His cause was taken up by others including children in other, wealthy countries — children like Craig Keilburger. They too have discovered that they can do something to help the world, that they too can be young heroes.

